



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Driven to DiscoverSM

Susan Power

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I am hitched to the living, still moved by their concerns. My spirit never abandons the Dakota people, though sometimes all it can do is watch. I was there when the army confiscated our horses to cut off our legs. I stood behind the Ghost Dancers, and when they fainted in desperate, useless ecstasy, I blew a refreshing wind into their faces. There have been too many soldiers and too many graves. Too many children packed into trains and sent to the other side of the country. Many times I ran alongside those tracks and waved at the bleak copper faces. You are Dakota, I called to them. You are Dakota. One time I stood in front of a chuffing engine and tried to keep it from moving forward, but it blasted through me. I saw the language shrivel, and though I held out my hands to catch the words, so many of them slipped away, beyond recall. I am a talker now and chatter in my people's ears until I grow weary of my own voice. I am memory, I tell them when they're sleeping.

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1961
- * Native American novelist
- * Member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of Fort Yates, ND

Biography

While recovering from an appendectomy and coming out of her anesthesia in her hospital bed, Susan Power decided to end her law career to pursue creative writing. When she awoke from her surgery she saw a Dakota Sioux woman standing in her hospital room wearing a sky blue beaded dress. It was this vision spirit who would later become a main character of her first novel, which won the PEN/Hemingway Award for First Novel in 1995.

This page was researched and submitted by: Mara Carlson, Angi Dedinsky, Jolyn Duesterhoeft and Shari Oslos.



Susan Power

Biography continued

Born in Chicago in 1961, Power's parents raised her to be politically and socially aware. She had the opportunity to meet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the age of three. With her parents, Power became active in the Civil Rights movement, speaking out for all people. After being named Miss Indian Chicago at the age of 17, Power went on to get an A.B. degree in Psychology at Harvard/Radcliffe, and later she received her Juris Doctorate from Harvard Law School.

Working her way up from a housekeeping job to being the editor of the University of Chicago Law Review, Power attributes her knowledge of legal writing as the motivation to pursue her creative writing. She began writing *The Grass Dancer* while attending the Iowa Writer's Workshop in 1992 and finished it in only two and a half years. In an oral interview Power stated, "I produce my best work under serious pressure." Power is currently a freelance writer supported by an Alfred Hodder Fellowship in Humanities at Princeton University. She also pursues her interests in acting, singing and performing.

Power's mother, Susan Kelly Power (Gathering of Storm Clouds Woman), founded the American Indian Center in Chicago and was very dedicated to her tribe, The Standing Rock Sioux of Fort Yates, North Dakota. While Power's mother, the descendant of the Sioux Chief Mato Nupa (Two Bears), would recite her stories about their native lineage, her father, Carleton Gilmore Power, the grandson of the governor of New Hampshire during the Civil War, would read her stories at night. Both of these traditions form the basis of her writing. Power states that her inspiration comes from her mother's native influence, Louise Erdrich, Toni Morrison and Shakespeare, which stems from her memorizing Romeo and Juliet by the age of twelve. This love for literature strengthens her writing.

The Grass Dancer by Susan Power is a uniquely told tale of a North Dakota Sioux tribe. *The Grass Dancer* is not political, instructional, accusatory, or vengeful. This book focuses on the Native Americans personal experiences and values within themselves, while also dealing with their relationships with one another. Though she writes particularly about her own culture, Power is able to avoid alienating non-native readers. She tries to make the reader aware that for Native Americans everyone blends together harmoniously in the community. There are no definite boundaries between past and present, or between one person's experience and another's. This compelling novel shares stories, triumphs, questions and experiences of her native people. Power uses the forces of ancestry, dream images, and storytelling to fully engage her reader.



Susan Power

Biography continued

There are several reoccurring themes throughout the novel, one of the most important being ancestry. Power explains how life does not end in the human world. Spirits remain to influence the living long after their death, increasing the influence of the elders and ancestors. Through different story lines Power shows the reader just how essential ancestry is to each and every person's life. The elders of the younger characters presented are seen as the power among them all and are the "wise ones" who are meant to be followed. For example, "Red Dress" is seen as an all-knowing character. Though a deceased member of the tribe, Red Dress's power influences many of the living tribal members and her impact is immense. She connects the living with the dead through memories, stories, and interaction with spirits through dreams.

Dream imagery shines through as another theme of the text, as well as an illustrative tool. Power writes of Sioux culture using such poetic language that it reads like a dream world. At the same time, the reader is transported into the reality of the reservation and its situations. Power uses this imagery to foreshadow the future and revisit past issues that are essential to life. These dream images bring the reader closer to the characters and their customs by exposing ideas and circumstances that may not otherwise be talked about. Through this use of dreams and visions, Power demonstrates their importance to Native Americans as sources of guidance and enlightenment. Power stated in an oral interview that, "Given the culture I was raised in, this is not magical realism, this is actually reality to me." It's the reader's cultural interpretation that perceives it as dream imagery.

The use of different characters' voices throughout the narration brings up several ideas. With the plot set in a back-peddling motion, Power tells of the effect of certain characters' death before she tells of their lives. When interviewed, Power said, "I write out character's stories. The characters come to me unbidden, I don't ask for them to come. They sort of start haunting me and I have to figure out what their stories are." We hear the voices of tribal members who focus strictly on keeping traditions alive. For example, Power uses the voices of women who are afraid of their "magic," spiritual old men trying to be of help to those who are tormented, young adults questioning whether they belong on the reservation, and an outsider who desperately tries to learn the ways of the tribe. To read this book is to better understand powwows, buffalo hunts, the connection with ancestors and the love that keeps spirits alive. Power uses the influence of deceased elders to tell the stories of those ancestor's lives through dreams, their stories help teach the descendants who experience those dreams how to live their lives. Power allows her writing to shift freely through each chapter, using a different first or third person voice to tell the story.



Susan Power

Biography continued

This book would definitely produce multiple interpretations, depending on whether a reader approached it from a racial, ethnic, cultural or familial background. Power, a Dakota Sioux, tells the story of the American Indians in a way that allows the reader to feel as if they are traveling along with each situation. Through descriptions and analogous phrases, Power brings the reader in touch with a world that may have previously been foreign to them. Power makes it very easy for “outsiders” to understand the lifestyles of the Native American. However, it may be difficult for those without much previous knowledge of Native American culture to see how important the connection to dreams, magic and family really are to the native people.

Power states that she has no agenda for her readers and that “what a reader makes of my work is beyond my control. I worry too much that people read my work sometimes as History, Sociology, Ethnography, when it’s really fiction, and that’s all it’s meant to be.” The novel uses current language and issues to tell its story, which helps to link people of all backgrounds to its context. One confusing aspect of the text is that there is no definite distinction made between the dream-like stories and reality. The shift in character voice also causes the story to be a little difficult to follow at times. Power neither takes the time to explain where the story is leading nor tells the reader what she wants them to know in a tone that is simply concrete and easy to follow. Power says, “This is not what it’s like to be Sioux, it’s just a human experience. If you have five different reservation Indians, you’re going to have five entirely different experiences.”

Overall, Power uses the strength of ancestry, dream images, and narration through storytelling to tell about her personal experiences as a Native American woman. She leaves room for the reader to interpret and respond to her text in their own way without limiting the possibilities. She produces topics that would interest readers of all kinds. This book is realistic, honest, and powerful but may require more than one reading to be fully understood.



Susan Power

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